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## Dress Rehearsal Rag

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# Dress Rehearsal Rag

*by Keith Barlog*

She placed the handset cautiously on the receiver producing a faint click. A single arching 40-watt desk lamp lit the living room, the dull coat of primer paint absorbing the light, smothering the reflection. The room appeared candlelit with the drowsy lamp lifting the yellow-orange milieu. Midway across the room the light seemed disrupted, as if by some outside influence it was halted, or maybe the light just decayed in the prevailing darkness. The opposite walls bookshelf, TV stand, and framed portraits were painted in the shadow. Head stooped downward, she examined the sinewy veins along her hands and wrists, slightly raised like straws, an elaborate system her limbs used to drink from the heart. 'What ugly rough hands,' she thought, 'in an office most my life and I have the hands of a housemaid. I haven't even mowed the lawn since I was thirteen,' she thought, as her mind disputed the toll time had taken.

She settled back in the reclining office chair, emitting an arresting metal on metal screech, piercing the once silent room. She prostrated herself, staring meditatively at the ceiling, enveloping herself in the deadening silence that can only be found after a loud piercing noise. She began studying the dust particles floating on his eyes, following the microscopic snaking specs and dots with her pupils, back and forth, as they moved across the white ceiling backdrop. She tried making a game out of it, trying to keep the



specs still enough to study the shapes. She remembered as a child discovering the shapely snakes for the first time, her recognition of it scaring her as she thought they were scratches on her eyes, upsetting herself enough to run crying to her mother. Boredom taking over the silly game, she recoiled from the chair and in one impetuous motion, threw herself to her feet.

She made her way into the kitchen and opened the beige refrigerator door. The light crept out painting her face in whiteness. "Wheat bread, E&J Brandy, apricot jelly, Skippy peanut butter, ketchup, mustard, salsa, Starfish tuna..... god I need to go shopping," she mumbled moving items around searching for a hidden delight. This unexpected night at home with nothing to eat left her stomach growling in the silence. "Gotta make something," she said settling with peanut butter and jelly. The end pieces of the bread usually thrown to the birds, were all that remained in the bag and they were hardening with age. She spread the chunky peanut butter, with "Super Crunch" on first, careful not to break the coarse wheat bread. She spread the saffron-colored apricot jelly on the other piece. She liked the peanut butter side extra thick, the jelly applied just for the compliment, rather than the sweet taste itself. Placing the two pieces together she went over and sat on the lily patterned couch, adorned with little white doilies on each arm, all given to her by her mother when she moved from home all those years ago. Remote in hand, the power button was pushed and the television turned on with a static thump.

"Two doctors at the Hinderdine Clinic on 44th and King road where shot to death in the parking lot in what seems to be an act of Pro-life extremists. The Belson police Department has arrested no suspe. . . couldn't even leave my apartment without getting dizzy and anxious. My doctor prescribed Paxil, and although hesitant, I decided to take the chance. Now I feel I've put on a new face and can go out into the world with confidence. My sister commented on the remarkable turnaround in my attitude and overall happiness. If you know anyone, or yourse. . . Bitch! You'd screw anyone wouldn't you?! Fuck you! What is your cunt a free gift with dinner and dancing? Shut up I've put up with your 'stress problem' crap for six months. I work my ass off seventy hours a week so when I get home-hell I don't need to justify myself, it happens to a lot of guys and How long was I supposed to wait for you to feel up to it again? Oh, so you run around with your head in every guys lap?..."



Tossing the remote against the cushion beside her, she stood up and went again into the kitchen. 'Huh, the kitchen light looks about dead, need to change that,' she thought. She walked up to the fridge, her bare feet slapping, sticking, and smacking on the cool white and gray linoleum. She scoured the condiments waiting for that new item to appear again. 'A peach?- Oh Christ, a peach would be excellent right now; the fuzzy skin and the mushy dripping inside,' she thought, imagining herself eating the fruit, habitually sucking the pit for flavor when all else was eaten. She picked up the tuna, hesitated, then placed it back on the shelf. She always considered tuna repulsive without mayonnaise. She pushed the fridge door closed and walked back into the room behind the couch facing the television.

"...rains around midday tomorrow, but after that it should clear up for a beautiful day, in the mid 80's, with just a few clouds left over from the showers. All you beach goers should be happy about that. Let's take a look at the seven day forecast, shall we? As you can see it should be a fine week, low humidity around 50%, temperatures high around 88 to 90, sunny, with a little wind coming in from the Southwest, but lookout for this weekend cause we have got rain."

'Rain isn't so bad when it is warm,' she thought, 'what's the big deal about getting a little wet?' But cold weather bothered her, making her shoulder ache from the shoulder dislocation last winter. 'What was the problem with all these people?-waiting for weather to dictate how their following day or week went,' she continued, wishing she herself could have such simple worries like thunderstorms and traffic. She was tired of waiting for something better, a ticket of admission into the common but malleable life. But no, tired is all she felt, like sagging drapes made out of linen sheets, inert and exhausted by the gravitation of life. Her father had always lectured her about men when she was growing up. "Men are only after one thing...you're just a piece of meat to them," he would say. She never understood his thinking: "Sex isn't a four-letter word to be shocked about. I'm the one that allows it anyway," she argued, her squinted eyes looking in bewilderment at her stern father. But, the lectures always persisted.

Stepping out of the kitchen, she turned left into the bathroom and flipped on the light/fan combo switch, the engine hum of the fan drowning out the television's disturbances as she shut the door; her brain going awry as she confronted her own image in the



mirror. She felt squeezed as the pressure in her sinus cavities increased, a sensation of fighting back tears. She felt like a square block being forced into the circle slot of a baby toy. Sleep was always a good remedy, but a coffee at lunch started her once exhausted body, the caffeine far exceeding its planned fruition, and now she only wished it away. Eager to end this day, dispelling any notion of getting her work done, she diagnosed a warm bath. She opened up a bathroom cabinet with her left hand and pulled out her contact supplies. With wide opals, gently her right index finger touched each eye removing a contact, then placed them in their respective concave hollows and pinched two drops of cleaning solution on each. She returned the contact case to the cabinet shelf below the Aspirin, oral saline laxative, vapor rub, and Dimetapp PM.

She took a deep breath and turned on the faucet, small cupping hands reached under, filling, then leaning over, lightly tossing the water against her flushed face. The water cleared from her eyes revealing her blunted nose, cellophane streams slipping down; sandy bangs to cheek bones, cheek bones to thin upper lip, lips to thin chin, forking rivulets that split through her concealer, blush and bronzer. She placed her hands on the cold faucet cabinet and looked deep into the eyes of her reflection until her vision went blurry. A faintness cut in, the beat quickening in her breast, warm rushes flowing to her shy limbs, the counter becoming cooler under her blood warmed hands. That image in the mirror, not her, but an actress playing a role; distant, but in touches reach. She began to recede into an audience with sweat and worry 'That's me,' she abjectly thought, her frail, loosely draped, wide hipped character looking back with a sad stare. The space surrounding her brain distended and contracted, blood red heat in her ventricles, down the lumpy spine of this soft machine, this sperm and egg sandwich with a name. 'What choices have I made-to live alone-independent-free to choose what I want? Sometimes it's too hard to be alive,' she reflected, quickly judging her life.

She eyed some Percodan on the top shelf of the cabinet. With a slow hand she picked up the prescription and placed two in her mouth, followed by two more; then leaning under the faucet, she washed the tablets down with frightening ease. "Simple enough," she said, "now just a few more and then run the tub" She emptied the remaining tabs into her mouth, tasting a sickening bitterness as they began to dissolve in her mouth. 'Just swallow!' her



mind screamed. She bumped out of the bathroom to the kitchen and flooded the taste down with some E&J. Returning to the bathroom she ran the tub hot and sat on the toilet, waiting patiently for the pills to take action.

The tub filled steamily, clouding the mirror image away. She undressed down to her black slip, kicking her work clothes aside and apprehensively stepped in, dipping her toes first to ease in. Even at this moment her body shied away from painful burn. She laid back, her slip clinging like a wet sock. Sinking back, immersing her head underwater, she opened her gentle brown eyes to see the soft-white ceiling. Her vision receded, appearing to her like she was standing on the ocean floor, looking up at the sun rays cutting through the water with the precision of a doctor's scalpel.

Lessened in feeling, she relaxed and smiled at her now floating spirit. 'This must be what an opium dream feels like,' she thought. 'But its.....its dying.' A darkness hiding nothing began to pervade. A nothingness she felt, a nothingness she would become. 'Can I?'

All she felt was her throat and her hand forcing itself inside. Her wet rubbery skin struggling to balance on the tile, finally grabbing the seat and lifting the cover, a poisonous flow erasing itself from her body. Remnants of peanut butter and jelly swirled down the bowl, a cold pallid body collapsing to the floor exhausted but breathing. 'Just another dress rehearsal,' she thought.